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# Political Participation Among Prisoners

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## *Introduction*

Penal systems are among our most serious problems.<sup>1</sup> Recent riots and rhetoric have captured our attention, but have not increased our knowledge of the political attitudes and activities of prisoners.<sup>2</sup> This research: (1) conceptualizes and measures political participation among men in prison; (2) observes the association of selected sets of social, political, and penal variables with the inmates' political participation; (3) compares the inmates' political participation to that of the general public; and, (4) compares minimum and maximum security samples.

There are two independent samples of prisoners. One consists of 77 volunteers from the 300-man "model" Illinois state minimum security institution at Vienna<sup>3</sup>, sampled in March 1972 with much cooperation from administrators and residents. The other contains 112 men from the 1100 who were in the Arkansas maximum security unit at Cummins. The questionnaire<sup>4</sup> was administered to them in April 1972.<sup>5</sup> The samples are not random of all American prisons, but do tap institutional characteristics commonly found and are of different security arrangements.

## *Conceptualization of the Study: Dependent Variables*

Political participation among prisoners (dependent variable) is conceptualized in two ways. First, activities concerned with formal elections held among prisoners to determine representatives in Inmate Councils are observed. These are: interest expressed, voting, campaign activities, and running for or holding an inmate office. Questions 1-6 in Appendix I are measures. This is called formal inmate participation, and corresponds to conventional ways that political participation has been conceptualized in research involving the general American population.<sup>6</sup> The second way concerns com-

<sup>1</sup>It is difficult to report the magnitude of the problem because of unreported and/or inaccurately reported statistics. However, on a "typical" day federal prisons contain some 20,000 prisoners, state 200,000 and local about 160,000.

<sup>2</sup>For a sampling see: *New York Times Index*, 1971, pp. 1385-89.

<sup>3</sup>*The Vienna Observer*, October 8, 1971, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>The instrument was pretested at the Work Release Center in Carbondale, Illinois in winter 1971-72. The residents screened terms or phraseology, and for items that had a different meaning to prisoners or would not be answered honestly.

<sup>5</sup>The Cummins unit was/is in the process of court-ordered reform (*Holt v Sarver*, 300 F. Supp. 825) following disclosure of brutality (see Thomas Murton and Joe Hyams, *Accomplices to the Crime*, (New York: Grove Press, 1969). The Cummins sample represents an effort by the new Department of Corrections and the Cummins Administration to demonstrate their commitment to an open and progressive institution. The Cummins men were selected by the Associate Superintendent of Treatment, Ronald Dobbs, using the criteria of literacy, respect among inmates, and inclusion of those recently elected to the new Inmate Council.

<sup>6</sup>See: Lester Milbrath, *Political Participation*, (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1965), p. 18; Donald Matthews and James Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1966), p. 53.

petition and/or cooperation for things valued among prisoners.<sup>7</sup> This is named informal inmate participation, and is operationalized by the extent to which an inmate's advice or opinions are sought after or listened to regarding things of value to prisoners (see questions 7-12 Appendix I).

*Distribution of Inmate Political Activities*

The data regarding formal (Table 1) and informal (Table 2) prisoner politics suggests that men in minimum (Vienna) and maximum (Cummins) security institutions engage in inmate politics to about the same extent; differences occur in formal activities only with regard to inmate voting (significantly higher at  $\leq .05$  in the minimum security group), and informally there is a slightly higher, though non-significant, rate of participants within the maximum security group. While there is little difference between the prisoner samples, each inmate group seems to participate in its formal politics more than the American public does in its comparable politics.<sup>8</sup> This meets expectations because the closed nature of penal institutions causes most events out of the prison routine to receive widespread prisoner attention.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that there is enough variance in both types of inmate politics to inquire into their possible associations with selected variables in the remainder of this paper.

TABLE 1  
DISTRIBUTION OF FORMAL<sup>a</sup> INMATE  
PARTICIPATION IN PERCENTAGES

	Interest in Inmate Elections		Voting in Inmate Elections		Campaign Activities in Inmate Elections		Running for or Holding an Inmate Office	
Level of Participation	V	C	V	C	V	C	V	C
High	28.6%	29.7%	64.9%	37.8%	41.6%	33.9%	9.1%	10.7%
Medium	53.2%	35.1%	4.1%	23.4%	27.3%	25.0%	20.8%	24.1%
Low	18.2%	35.1%	31.1%	37.7%	31.2%	41.1%	70.1%	65.2%

<sup>a</sup>See Appendix I, questions 1-6 for operationalization of this table  
Legend: V = Vienna; C = Cummins; N's equal 77 and 112

<sup>7</sup>Gresham M. Sykes, *The Society of Captives*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 63-83.

<sup>8</sup>For the conventional American rates see: Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, *Participation in America*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 31.

<sup>9</sup>This process is sometimes called "gearing-down." Because prison life usually becomes extremely routine and petty, and because communication with other humans is restricted to a small number, any event out of the ordinary receives widespread attention among prisoners. For a discussion of the closed nature of prisons, see: Erving Goffman, "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions: The Inmate World," in Donald R. Cressey, *The Prison*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961), p. 16.



TABLE 2  
DISTRIBUTION OF INFORMAL INMATE PARTICIPATION<sup>a</sup>

<i>Level of Informal Activity</i>	<i>Minimum Security (Vienna)</i>	<i>Maximum Security (Cummins)</i>
High	0%(0)	2%(2)
Moderately High	10%(8)	16%(18)
Medium	46%(35)	50%(56)
Moderately Low	34%(26)	24%(27)
Low	10%(8)	9%(11)

<sup>a</sup>See Appendix I, questions 7-12 for operationalization of table

### *Independent Variables and Findings*

Four sets of independent variables are examined for their relationships with the two types of inmate politics. These are: (1) pre-penal socio-economic characteristics; (2) political attitudes; (3) pre-penal political experiences; and (4) penal variables. All coefficients reported are Kendall Tau B's at  $\leq .05$  level of significance.<sup>10</sup>

The first set of pre-penal sociological variables is divided into two subsets. The first subset contains elements that indicate early exposure to criminal experiences: size of place reared, broken home, and street gang involvement. Research has suggested that these are linked with criminality and influence among prisoners.<sup>11</sup> However, this research finds that none is related significantly to prisoner politics in either sample of prisoners, although there is a weak (Kendall's Tau B = 0.20) inclination for men from larger urban backgrounds to be more involved in the informal activities of the minimum security sample. With regard to the distributions of this subset, some 60 and 54 percent of the minimum and maximum security samples respectively report they are from places over 15,000;<sup>12</sup> and some 31 percent of both groups report that their parents are divorced or were never married; similarly 31 percent of both groups say they were street gang members before incarceration.

The second sociological subset contains pre-penal variables which literature indicates could be important toward participation: occupational status, education, social mobility, race, and age. In general, there is a mild inclination for each variety of inmate politics to increase in both the minimum and maximum security samples as these variables increase.

<sup>10</sup>Kendall's Tau B is a measure of association between two ordinally measured variables. For details see: Hubert M. Blalock, *Social Statistics*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1960), pp. 319-25.

<sup>11</sup>Marshall B. Clinard, (*Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1966), pp. 104, 317-18, 225.

<sup>12</sup>Only size of place may be compared to the public, and Verba and Nie report that the feeling of common identity rather than size is the important variable for the public. See Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, pp. 236-37.

TABLE 3

"On the outside, what was the best legal job you had?"

Job Status	Minimum Security (Vienna)	Maximum Security (Cummins)
High (e.g., Teacher or Lawyer)	0%(0)	8%(9)
Medium (e.g., Plumber or Mechanic)	26%(19)	34%(37)
Low (e.g., Hired Hand or Laborer)	74%(54)	58%(63)

Looking at this second subset of sociological variables in more detail, Table 3 illustrates that the pre-penal occupational status of the prisoners is the usual preponderance of lower SES found in state prisons.<sup>13</sup> Regarding relationships, the prisoners in both groups are mildly inclined to increase their participation in both types of prisoner politics significantly ( $\leq .05$ ) as their pre-penal job status increases (Formal: Vienna campaign 0.25, office 0.27; Cummins: office 0.20. Informal: Vienna 0.29; Cummins 0.24).<sup>14</sup>

Looking at education, both sets of prisoners grouped in the junior and senior high school categories (about 75 percent). The maximum security (Cummins) men show no relationships, while the minimum group does slightly increase its involvement in prisoner politics with higher education (Formal: interest 0.16, campaign 0.12, office 0.22; Informal: 0.20). Thus, while various studies have shown an increase in the public's conventional political participation accompanying increases in job status and education, this is the consistent pattern only for the minimum security sample, the maximum group has this pattern for job status and inmate politics but not for education and inmate politics.

Pre-penal social mobility was measured by comparing the best legal job of the prisoner with that of his father; so little existed no relationships could be ascertained.<sup>15</sup>

Black Americans comprise about 11 percent of the population, yet state prisons routinely contain 30 to 60 percent black men.<sup>16</sup> This disproportionate black share of the penal population was expected to be important because prisons are thought to reflect various societal conditions, including racial

<sup>13</sup>Richard Korn and Lloyd McCorkle, *Criminology and Penology*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1959), p. 319.

<sup>14</sup>Enclosed in parentheses are the statistically significant ( $\leq .05$ ) Kendall Tau B correlation coefficients specifying the relationships just discussed. Interpreting this for the reader: The Vienna sample displays a statistically significant coefficient of 0.25 between pre-penal job status and inmate campaign activities and one of 0.27 between inmate office activities and pre-penal job status, while among the Cummins respondents a significant coefficient of 0.20 exists between pre-penal job status and inmate office activities. And the Vienna group's informal participation increased as pre-penal job status increased to the extent of a 0.29 Tau B coefficient, with the Cummins men increasing at a 0.24 coefficient.

<sup>15</sup>This lack of social mobility is of note to social theorists who link crime to lack of legitimate opportunities for low classes to achieve material and status rewards. See: Marshall Clinard, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, pp. 317-18.

<sup>16</sup>Korn and McCorkle, *Criminology and Penology*, p. 319.



tensions.<sup>17</sup> The minimum security institution (Vienna) normally contained 40 percent black, while its sample has 38; these percentages for the maximum security sample are 48 and 31 respectively.

TABLE 4  
AVERAGES<sup>a</sup> OF INMATE PARTICIPATION BY RACE AND SECURITY

Formal Inmate Participation	Minimum Security Black	White	Maximum Security Black	White
Running for or Holding an Inmate Office	1.66 (29) <sup>c</sup>	1.66 (47)	1.65 (34)	1.82 (76)
Campaign Activities in Inmate Elections	2.50 (29)	2.26 (47)	2.40 (34)	2.03 (76)
Voting in Inmate Elections	3.93 (29)	3.61 (42)	3.63 (34)	2.86 (76)
Interest in Inmate Elections	2.48 (29)	2.34 (47)	2.38 (34)	2.18 (76)
Informal Inmate Participation	3.06 <sup>b</sup> (29)	2.82 (47)	2.81 (34)	3.28 (76)

<sup>a</sup>The scale ranged from 5 to 1 for each of the formal activities (i.e., High=5, Medium=3, Low=1 corresponding to the rows in Table 1).

<sup>b</sup>The scale is also 5 to 1 for informal activities.

<sup>c</sup>The numbers in parentheses are the number of respondents in that cell.

In each sample black prisoners participate slightly more in formal inmate politics, except holding inmate office among the maximum security group. The results for informal activities are mixed: blacks higher among the minimum security men but lower within the maximum set. However, in all instances these differences are small and none is statistically significant. Compared to the American public, the inmates in general seem to exhibit the hierarchical pattern reported for the general public.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, black prisoners with their slightly higher formal activity rate, appear to differ from the reports of black conventional political participation in the general public.<sup>19</sup>

The ages of the men surveyed averaged 26 and 29 for the minimum and maximum samples respectively. As expected,<sup>20</sup> our samples display a mild tendency for both types of inmate politics to increase as their ages increase (Formal: Vienna voting 0.20, office 0.20; Cummins voting 0.17, office 0.19; Informal: Vienna 0.27; Cummins 0.32). These relationships are similar to those reported for the American public concerning age and political participa-

<sup>17</sup>*Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1966); George Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1970); Etheridge Knight, *Black Voices From Prison*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970).

<sup>18</sup>Milbrath, *Political Participation*, p. 18. Only interest in inmate elections did not scale hierarchically.

<sup>19</sup>Matthews and Prothro have reported that in the Deep South blacks participated less in "visible" actions, e.g., campaigns, but more in "invisible" actions, e.g., discussing politics among themselves. See their *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, pp. 44-45. And Verba and Nie have written that blacks were under represented in contacting public officials either for personal or communal concerns, and in being inactive; but that blacks were over represented in being inactives, voting only, and in partisan campaigns. See their *Participation in America*, p. 152.

<sup>20</sup>Clarence Schrag, "Leadership Among Prison Inmates," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. XIX (Feb., 1954), p. 34.

tion,<sup>21</sup> and supports the notion that inmate participation increases with experience as it apparently does in the general public.<sup>22</sup>

TABLE 5

"When you were on the streets, about how often did you discuss political things?"

	Minimum Security (Vienna) (N=77)	Maximum Security (Cummins) (N=112)
A Great Deal	10.4%(8)	7.1%(8)
Often	14.3%(11)	5.4%(6)
Occasionally	48.1%(37)	50.9%(57)
Almost Never	27.3%(21)	36.6%(41)

"When you were eligible to vote on the outside, how often did you vote in various local, state, and national elections?"

Always	21.1%(12)	16.5%(17)
Usually	17.5%(10)	7.8%(8)
Occasionally	17.5%(10)	20.4%(21)
Never	43.9%(25)	55.3%(57)

"On the outside, did you every go to a political rally or meeting of any kind?"

Often	11.7%(9)	9.8%(11)
Occasionally	24.7%(19)	24.1%(27)
Once or Twice	29.9%(23)	20.5%(23)
Never	33.8%(26)	45.5%(51)

"On the outside, did you ever hold an elective office of any kind?"

Yes	22.7%(17)	20.8%(22)
No	77.3%(58)	79.2%(83)

Turning our attention now toward the second set of inmate's pre-penal conventional political experiences, four activities are observed: discussion of politics, voting, attendance at rallies, and elective offices held. The distributions in Table 5 meet expectations in being lower than that of the public's in discussion of politics and voting. However, the prisoner's attendance at rallies and the holding of elective office are higher.<sup>23</sup> Regarding relationships, generally there is some mild to moderate carryover of pre-penal political experiences into formal inmate politics, but only inconsistently into informal prisoner activities. More specifically, as the level of pre-penal political discussions increases both types of inmate politics tend to significantly increase in each sample (Formal: Vienna interest 0.26, voting 0.26; Cummins interest 0.23, voting 0.23, campaign 0.28, office 0.11. Informal: Vienna 0.14; Cummins 0.21). With respect to pre-penal voting, there is a moderate tendency for formal inmate activities to increase in both samples with higher pre-penal voting levels, but no relationships regarding informal (Formal: Vienna voting 0.25, office 0.25; Cummins interest 0.23, voting 0.16, campaign 0.17, office 0.17). Formal inmate activities in both groups increases moderately as pre-

<sup>21</sup>Milbrath, *Political Participation*, p. 134.

<sup>22</sup>Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, p. 148.

<sup>23</sup>The 31 percent of the public reported as expressing a political opinion seems higher than the inmates, though a different question was used, see: John Robinson, Jerrold Rusk, and Kendra Head, *Measures of Political Attitudes*, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Institute for Social Research, July, 1969), pp. 591, 602. The one-third of prisoners who say they usually or always voted is below the public, see: *Ibid.*, p. 591. While attendance at rallies was low, it was higher than that reported for the public, see: *Ibid.*, p. 604. No doubt, the prisoner's elective office figure was inflated by them counting any office.



penal attendance at rallies increases, but this pattern is found only among the maximum men for informal actions (Formal: Vienna interest 0.17, voting 0.20; Cummins interest 0.28, voting 0.23, campaign 0.17, office 0.13. Informal: Cummins 0.17). No relationship exists between pre-penal elective offices held and inmate politics.<sup>24</sup>

The third set of variables are political attitudes. Because much of the rhetoric of recent prison uprisings has overtones of political alienation, two attitudinal aspects are examined: (1) The feeling of trust, confidence, or affection that inmates direct toward the "nation" (diffuse support).<sup>25</sup> Researchers have found this to be one dimension of political alienation.<sup>26</sup> (2) The extent to which prisoners feel they can influence their political environment. This is observed by inquiring into their feeling of political futility. Table 6 displays that the maximum security group has a significantly higher feeling of confidence in the national government than the minimum set. However, both inmate groups are lower than the 90 percent of the public who agreed or agreed strongly with a similar statement<sup>27</sup> (combining the Strongly Agree and Agree percentages for the first question in Table 6: minimum security percent 45; maximum security percent 69). With respect to relationships, only the maximum security men mildly increase some formal activities as their diffuse support increases (interest 0.24, voting 0.20, campaign 0.29).

TABLE 6

"I usually have confidence that the government will do what is right."<sup>a</sup>

	Minimum Security (Vienna)	Maximum Security (Cummins)
Strongly Agree	7.8%(6)	13.4%(15)
Agree	37.7%(29)	55.4%(62)
Disagree	45.5%(35)	27.7%(31)
Strongly Disagree	9.1%(7)	3.1%(4)

"Even if I could vote, it's no use worrying my head about public affairs on the outside, I couldn't do anything about them anyway."<sup>b</sup>

	Minimum Security (Vienna)	Maximum Security (Cummins)
Strongly Agree	5.2%(4)	8.0%(9)
Agree	22.1%(17)	24.1%(27)
Disagree	48.1%(37)	49.1%(55)
Strongly Disagree	24.7%(19)	18.8%(21)

<sup>a</sup>Measure of diffuse support

<sup>b</sup>Measure of political futility

The prisoners display higher political futility than the 20 percent of the public who agreed or agreed strongly with a similar statement<sup>28</sup> (combining

<sup>24</sup>This last statement is rendered less reliable by the small N's (Vienna 17; Cummins 22) resulting from 20 percent of each sample having reported holding *any* elective office before incarceration, e.g., school and organization offices.

<sup>25</sup>David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1965), p. 273.

<sup>26</sup>John Jackson III, "The Political Behavior and Socio-Economic Backgrounds of Black Students: The Antecedents of Protest", *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, Vol. XV, (Nov., 1971), pp. 661-686.

<sup>27</sup>The question used with the public was: "I usually have confidence that the government will do what is right." Robinson, Rusk, and Head, *Measures of Political Attitudes*, p. 177.

<sup>28</sup>The item used with the public was: "It's no use worrying my head about public affairs, I can't do anything about them anyway." Robinson, Rusk, and Head, *Measures of Political Attitudes*, p. 178.



the Strongly Agree and Agree percentages for the second question in Table 6 yields: minimum 27 percent; maximum 32). Observing the relationships, each sample has a mild but consistent tendency to decrease both forms of inmate politics as their rate of political futility increases (Formal: Vienna interest  $-0.21$ , voting  $-0.26$ , campaign  $-0.11$ ; Cummins interest  $-0.36$ , voting  $-0.31$ , campaign  $-0.28$ , office  $-0.16$ . Informal: Vienna  $-0.23$ ; Cummins  $-0.15$ ). This pattern is similar to that of the public.<sup>29</sup>

The final set of variables are penal in nature and are divided into three subsets. The first subset consists of criminality in the prisoners' family, reform school experience, and age at first arrest. These were expected to be indications of skills and/or values that would promote interpersonal influence among prisoners; they did not. No relationship was found. The distributions are presented in the footnote below.<sup>30</sup>

The second subset of penal variables is concerned with criminal attitudes and mental states: adherence to criminal values, aggressiveness, and penal rule violation inclination. The first part of Table 7 displays the low adherence to criminal values in both samples. Each sample has moderate trends toward decreasing participation in each form of inmate politics as adherence to criminal values increases<sup>31</sup> (Formal: Vienna interest  $-0.14$ , voting  $-0.22$ ; Cummins interest  $-0.22$ , voting  $-0.20$ , campaign  $-0.33$ , office  $-0.14$ . Informal: Vienna  $-0.23$ ; Cummins  $-0.24$ ).

The samples also illustrate a low aggressiveness (second part of Table 7). More aggressive inmates have a mildly higher informal involvement (Vienna 0.14; Cummins 0.19) but no relationships with formal prisoner politics.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Verba and Nie, *Participation in America*, p. 88.

<sup>30</sup>Criminality in the family was ascertained by asking, "How many close relatives do you have who have done time?" Over one-half of the Vienna men and 38 percent of the Cummins group said that they had at least one such relative. Some 23 and 38 percent of the Vienna and Cummins men respectively report having been in a reform school. About two-thirds say they were arrested for the first time by age 18, another 16 and 17 percent of Vienna and Cummins men respectively report their first arrest was between the ages of 19 and 21.

<sup>31</sup>Literature would have suggested otherwise. See: Donald Garrity, "the Prison as a Rehabilitation Agency," in Donald Cressey, ed., *The Prison*, p. 359.

<sup>32</sup>Clemmer strongly implied that inmate leaders were aggressive, though he did not use the term, Donald Clemmer, *The Prison Community*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1968), Ch. VI; Sykes described his "real man" role-type as dominant and suggested he was aggressive though not in an unthinking manner, Gresham Sykes, *The Society of Captives*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 101-102; McCleery has suggested that since independence is a crucial value among prisoners, influential inmates are at least aggressive enough to avoid being aggressed against, Richard McCleery, "The Governmental Process and Informal Social Control", in Donald R. Cressey, ed., *The Prison*, p. 166; Schrag reported a strong tendency for influential inmates to be aggressive, Clarence Schrag, "Leadership Among Prison Inmates," p. 40.

TABLE 7

"People who work for a living are fools," and "Because of the way a man is treated in prison, he should take the first chance he has to get even with society."<sup>a</sup>

	Minimum Security (Vienna)	Maximum Security (Cummins)
Strongly Agree	1.3%(1)	6.3%(7)
Agree	6.5%(5)	5.4%(6)
Disagree	29.9%(23)	33.9%(38)
Strongly Disagree	62.4%(48)	54.1%(61)

"If I want something, I don't let anything stand in my way as long as I know I can get by with it."<sup>b</sup>

	Minimum Security (Vienna)	Maximum Security (Cummins)
Always True	0%	7.1%(8)
Usually True	11.7%(9)	8.9%(10)
Sometimes True	41.6%(32)	42.0%(47)
Never True	46.8%(36)	42.0%(47)

"I get more tickets (write-ups) than most guys here do."<sup>c</sup>

	Minimum Security (Vienna)	Maximum Security (Cummins)
Strongly Agree	1.3%(1)	1.8%(2)
Agree	0%	11.8%(13)
Disagree	39.5%(30)	62.7%(69)
Strongly Disagree	59.2%(45)	23.6%(26)

<sup>a</sup>The responses to these two questions were combined to measure adherence to criminal values.

<sup>b</sup>Measure of aggressiveness.

<sup>c</sup>Measure of penal rule violation rate.

The maximum security men are significantly more inclined to break penal rules (last part of Table 7). However, with respect to relationships, the maximum men only slightly increase one formal inmate activity (office 0.13) as their violations increase. And, while the minimum men show no effect on formal activities they decrease their informal involvement a little with higher violations (-).

The final subset of penal variables are: length of sentence, time served, and recidivism. In general, the formal inmate activities increase only among the minimum men with increases in this subset, whereas informal involvement increases in both samples as this subset increases. Specifically, as the length of sentence increases the minimum men increase their formal and informal rates, while the maximum group does so only informally (Formal: Vienna interest 0.23, voting 0.21, campaign 0.16, office 0.27. Informal: Vienna 0.25; Cummins 0.21). Time served in prison has a small increase in both samples for each form of inmate politics (Formal: Vienna interest 0.24, voting 0.27, campaign 0.24, office 0.24; Cummins office 0.20. Informal: Vienna 0.25; Cummins 0.24). Finally, recidivism shows only one relationship with formal inmate politics (Vienna voting 0.19) and informal actions increase only among maximum men (0.20). The distributions are in the footnote below.<sup>33</sup>

### Summary and Conclusions

This research has conceptualized political participation among prisoners in two ways: First, in terms of their involvement in activities concerned with elections among prisoners to inmate offices; second, in terms of an informal inmate "pecking order", ascertained by whose advice is sought among prison-

<sup>33</sup>Length of sentences varied, but 30 and 37 percent of the Vienna and Cummins samples are over 10 years. Also, time served varied but was concentrated in the 2-to-10 range. Recidivism was 41 and 70 percent respectively for Vienna and Cummins.



ers. These formal and informal inmate political activities are similarly patterned in both maximum and minimum penal security samples of volunteers,<sup>34</sup> and the prisoners' participation rates in formal inmate politics are higher than the general public's participation in conventional politics. To the extent that they are comparable, selected variables associated with the general public's participation in conventional politics tend also to be mildly related to prisoner politics in the same direction as the public's especially in the minimum security sample. Finally, formal and informal inmate influentials tend to have similar characteristics except that informal leaders are somewhat more aggressive and inclined to adhere to criminal values.

Inmate influentials, like leaders in general, reflect a given group's dominant values and are able to articulate its demands with some success.<sup>35</sup> The prisoners in our samples illustrate the emergence of men influential in formal inmate politics who are not oriented toward criminal values, are not more aggressive, and are not prison rule violators. This is indicative of the penal institutions' reflection of the society in general, with its greater sophistication and societal/prison communications. However, informal influentials continue to be characterized by more aggressiveness and adherence to criminal values, with those in the maximum security sample also inclined to be penal institution rule violators (though the minimum security informal influentials are lower rule violators). Formal and informal influentials differ on these characteristics because the men represent different "constituencies", i.e., formal leaders must be capable of articulating prisoners' dominant values and aims to penal authorities, thus they represent the more general prisoner population; whereas, since informal leaders do not have to deal with those outside the society of prisoners, they may be men of prominence in a specific clique of four or five like-minded prisoners but where the cliques may differ from one another in values and aims (cliques usually center around similarities in age, backgrounds, common criminal experiences, etc.).

Having an early exposure to criminal elements does not provide an advantage in acquiring information and skills of influence among prisoners. Various indications of such experiences — size of place born and raised, broken home experiences, membership and/or position in a pre-penal street gang, criminality in the family, reform school background, and age at first arrest — are of no importance in inmate politics. It is experience in prison that provides the opportunity to acquire the knowledge, values and skills necessary for influence among prisoners: In both samples there is a tendency for men older than the institution's average (but not old), those with longer sentences, greater time served, and recidivists to be more active in both types of inmate politics (except for recidivism and informal involvement among the minimum security respondents).

<sup>34</sup>The volunteers included those elected to inmate office in both samples.

<sup>35</sup>A discussion of leadership theory is contained in: Ralph M. Stogdill, *Handbook of Leadership: A Survey of Leadership*, (New York: The Free Press, 1974), ch. 1.



Do politically alienated, fatalistic men have a disproportionate influence among prisoners as some recent riots have suggested?<sup>36</sup> Since our samples are not of rioters, this question cannot be directly answered. However, in the samples prisoners are more politically alienated than the general public, but politically alienated inmates are not more influential in inmate politics. Moreover, those inmates more fatalistic concerning their influence over public affairs are less active in prisoner politics.

Black men participate somewhat more in each sample for both types of inmate politics. However, in light of the attention that race has recently received, one would have expected a stronger relationship. The author suggests the reason race is not so important is because black men do not comprise a majority of either penal population surveyed. The data herein do not allow direct analysis of the impact of percentage black (since there are only two samples). However, indirect evidence from other sources is supportive: In penal institutional arrangements ranging from the Pontiac, Illinois institution for young offenders to the California maximum security prison at San Quentin, race appears vital when black prisoners comprise greater than half of these populations. At Pontiac young black street gang members are reported by former residents<sup>37</sup> as overwhelmingly dominant, while at San Quentin the former warden claims that racial-based gangs (Aryan Brotherhood, Black Guerrilla Army, Nuestra Familia, Mexican Mafia) are prominent and make control difficult with violence inevitable.<sup>38</sup>

Involvement in "lower" levels of pre-penal conventional political activities (i.e., political discussions and voting) is an asset with respect to formal inmate politics, (though not for informal); however, having engaged in "higher" levels of pre-penal activities (i.e., campaign and office) is not. This seems to be the case because men who have been highly involved in conventional pre-penal politics are more inclined to identify with the established order outside the prison (or are identified with it by the other prisoners), and are not trusted and/or are not interested in inmate affairs.

Thus, prisoner political activities are conducted in a pattern similar to the conventional political activities of the general public, although at somewhat higher rates; and, while selected variables that are associated with the public's conventional political participation are mildly inclined to show similar relationships in prisoner politics, societal and historical conditions are also reflected in prisoner politics, as are the problems inherent in incarceration.

#### APPENDIX I

This appendix is organized for the reader's convenience in interpreting Tables 1 and 2. Questions 1-6 are the indicators of formal inmate political

<sup>36</sup>New York Times *Index*, 1971, pp. 1385-89.

<sup>37</sup>This information came from interviews with former residents at the Pontiac institution who were in the Work Release Center in Carbondale, Illinois.

<sup>38</sup>"Ex-warden Sees Violence as Unmanageable in Future", *Arkansas Gazette*, July 6, 1974, p. 6A.

participation. The designations of HIGH, MEDIUM, and LOW above the alternative answers correspond to those rows in Table 1. The numbers in parenthesis beside these designations are the values assigned to them. Questions 7-12 are averaged to measure informal inmate involvement. The designations of HIGH to LOW above the alternatives, and the values assigned to them (in parenthesis), correspond to the rows in Table 2.

1. How interested would you say you are in things like the Resident's (or Inmate's) Council?

(5) HIGH	(3) MEDIUM	(1) LOW
I OFTEN THINK AND	ONCE IN AWHILE I	I ALMOST NEVER
TALK ABOUT SUCH	THINK AND TALK	THINK OR TALK
THINGS	ABOUT SUCH THINGS	ABOUT SUCH THINGS

2. As you know, some penal institutions allow inmates to elect other inmates to offices such as an Inmate Council. When you have had the chance to vote in such inmate elections, how often have you voted?

(5) HIGH	(3) MEDIUM	(1) LOW
EVERY OR ALMOST	ONCE IN A-	ALMOST NEVER
EVERY TIME	WHILE	OR NEVER

(Questions 3 and 4 averaged to obtain inmate campaign activities.)

3. I try to get guys organized to help elect the right man to the Resident's (or Inmate's) Council?

(5) HIGH	(3) MEDIUM	(1) LOW
THIS IS DEFINITELY	THIS IS	THIS IS
OR USUALLY TRUE	SOMETIMES TRUE	NEVER TRUE

4. I try to talk other men into voting for the right man for Resident's (or Inmate's) Council.

(alternatives same as question 3)

(Questions 5 and 6 averaged for inmate office activities.)

5. I have been a candidate for an elective inmate (or resident) office such as the Resident Council.

(5) HIGH	(3) MEDIUM	(1) LOW
YES, I HAVE SEVERAL	YES, I HAVE A	NO, I NEVER HAVE
TIMES	COUPLE OF TIMES	

6. Have you ever held (or now hold) any office or position where you were elected by other inmates (or residents)?

(alternatives same as question 5)

(Questions 7 - 12 averaged to obtain informal involvement.)

7. Compared to other residents (inmates) here, about how much do other men *take your advice* about how to settle an argument or a fight among residents (inmates)?

(5) HIGH	(4) MOD. HIGH	(3) MEDIUM	(2) MOD. LOW	(1) LOW
A LOT MORE	A LITTLE	ABOUT THE	A LITTLE	A LOT LESS
THAN THEY	MORE THAN	SAME AS	LESS THAN	THAN THEY
DO FROM	THEY DO	THEY DO	THEY DO	DO FROM
MOST MEN	FROM MOST	FROM MOST	FROM MOST	MOST MEN
	MEN	MEN	MEN	

8. Compared to other residents (inmates) here, about how often do men try to find out from you what's going to happen around here? (alternatives same as question 7)

9. Compared with other residents (inmates) here, about how much do other men *ask your advice* about ways to get "good time?" (alternatives same as question 7)

10. Compared to other residents (inmates) here, about how often do other men *ask your advice* about what the good jobs are here? (alternatives same as question 7)

11. Compared to other residents (inmates) here, about how much do other men *listen to what you think should be done* about some guy who is doing something that messes things up for other residents? (alternatives same as question 7)

12. Compared to other residents (inmates) here, about how often do men *ask your advice* about how to get housing unit transfers? (alternatives same as question 7)